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ABSTRACT

In a case study investigation of six black college freshmen from low socio-economic and black nonstandard English-speaking backgrounds, it was found that, as hypothesized, the students reflected in their writing a performance capability in standard English sufficient to render them functionally bidialectal. For these students, certain hypothesized psycho-cultural barriers to standard English did not appear to operate significantly in their writing. When they did operate, these barriers served to spark [students'] resistance to efforts to eradicate the black dialect and to intensify their desire to maintain their dialect for cultural group identification. The students' apparent awareness and acceptance of the instrumental benefits to be gained through their conformity to prevailing socially and academically accepted norms of linguistic behavior seemed to act as a significant constraint for standard English performance in their classroom writing. The study urges that the students' bidialectal ability be recognized and exploited to build greater linguistic facility through writing that is personally meaningful. (Author)

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PSYCHO-CULTURAL CONSIDERATIONS IN BLACK STUDENTS' WRITTEN LANGUAGE USE: A CASE STUDY

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A large number of college freshmen assigned to "remedial," "compensatory," or "enrichment" programs in English are black students who come from low socio-economic backgrounds where a variety of English called black dialect, or black nonstandard English (hereafter BNE) is spoken. Such students are usually assumed, both by those who assign and those who teach them, as well as by much of the general public, to lack either or both competence or performance[1] ability in standard English (hereafter SE). Oral usage patterns among these students, particularly in unmonitored situations, tend to reinforce such assumptions. Our study[2] indicated, however, that assumed SE incompetence among such students may not be a valid assumption. If it is not, certain notions of linguistic incompetence underlying many remedial English programs for "disadvantaged" students may need to be re-examined.

On the basis of considerable intuitive sense and some, albeit

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[1]The concept of competence and performance is based on Noam Chomsky's distinction between the two terms. He limits competence to a speaker's knowledge of grammar while performance is the actual production or use of that knowledge in a particular situation. Cf. Noam Chomsky, Aspects of Theory of Syntax, Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1965 for discussion of terms. In simple language, competence is the internalized knowledge which every speaker has, and performance is what a person does with that knowledge (competence) in a particular concrete situation.

[2]This article is based on the authors' dissertation: G. Heard and L. Stokes, The Relationship of Psycho-Cultural Factors to Standard English Use in the Writing of Selected Black College Freshmen (Doctor's dissertation, Rutgers University , 1975).

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scanty, anecdotal evidence in the literature, we hypothesized the existence of a bidialectal competency among many black freshmen in remedial English classes who are generally regarded, on the basis of test scores, socio-economic and cultural background, and characteristic oral performance, as lacking competence in SE. The SE component of the bidialectal ability, we hypothesized, would be demonstrated when the motivation for its use was sufficiently impelling.

We further hypothesized that what is so often regarded as SE incompetence might be explained by the operation of what we chose to call certain psycho-cultural constraints which could conceivably cause the deliberate avoidance or suppression of SE forms and the use of forms more psychologically and culturally compatible. Erik Erikson's (1968) postulation of identity formation provided for us a conceptual framework for our psycho-cultural hypothesis. According to Erikson, identity formation is a psychosocial process linked to present and historical cultural group identity and influenced not only by self- and group-perception, but also by perceptions of significant others outside an individual's primary cultural group.

Since language is intimately linked with the identity of an individual, and since particular varieties of language are linked with particular cultural groups, it seemed reasonable to us that the use of language could be affected either positively or negatively by the user's perceptions of his relationship to the culture of which the language is reflective and by values assigned that

language and culture by himself and by significant others. Thus we postulated variables, or psycho-cultural constraints which we perceived might operate singly or in combination to influence a black student's use of SE: (1) Identity and the Conflict of Cultural Values. This variable is rooted in how the student views himself and his relationship to a cultural group, and the attendant attitudes and values that result from that view. (2) Teacher Attitudes and Expectations. This variable involves how the student perceives how others (e.g., his teachers) perceive him and how these perceptions affect, either positively or negatively, his view of himself. (3) Motivation. However the student responds to the other variables affects his motivation, the variable most directly related to performance. If the student's attitude towards himself and his perceptions of his teachers' expectations of, and attitudes toward, him are negative, it is likely that his motivation for using SE will be negative; if a positive climate prevails, he is likely to be more inclined or motivated to use the standard dialect.

Many students of language and culture, among them W. Labov (1964), K. Johnson (1969), R. Jacobson (1970), and C. Mitchell-Kernan (1972), have recognized that the interplay of variables such as these often operates to complicate the black student's attitudes toward SE and possibly impede his production of it. A few scholars have, likewise, recognized that a disguised bidialectal competence does exist among some blacks who typically use BNE and who are typically regarded as lacking competence in SE.

Daniel Fader (1971), for instance, reports an incident in The Naked Children which confirmed for him a suspicion he had long harbored, but which, until then, he had lacked concrete evidence to support. The suspicion was that some children deliberately conceal their ability to use SE:

> This time I was certain I had heard what once before I had suspected. While I had been relaxed and a bit drowsy I had heard Cleo [a black ghetto child] speaking standard American English.

The shift to SE to which Fader refers had occurred when Cleo visited a predominantly white college campus and talked with some of the black students there. In her desire to identify with these students, Cleo adjusted her language to conform to theirs. Fader continued:

> The change hadn't struck me until I heard her lapse into the black argot which she always spoke in my presence: 'We together. We goes with him.' And minutes before I had heard her say, 'we're in the ninth grade' when speaking of herself and [a friend], and 'we go to Garnet-Patterson' when asked where she and the boys went to school. For the first time I understood that she was operating on a double language standard, and that at least in part she knew it. (p. 115)

Fader argues that a significant number of bright, but impoverished youngsters like Cleo have learned both SE and their own dialect, but consciously repress the SE because it represents to such children a mode of life in which they have little hope of participating. Cleo's case, however, further suggests that where the motivation is sufficient enough, such children can and will use SE.

Einar Haugen (1964) had earlier questioned the assumption that BNE speakers have not acquired SE and intimated that schools might be seeking the wrong goal with respect to language instruction for nonstandard speakers: "We don't need to make them bidialectal," Haugen observed, "we only need to change them from passive or unconscious bidialectals to active, conscious ones." (p. 25)

Such support (as the foregoing) as we were able to find for our bidialectal and psycho-cultural hypotheses was based on observations of spoken language. Since, however, at the college level, written language assumes greater importance (at least in terms of academic evaluation), and since little attention has been devoted in the literature to bidialectal competence in writing, we chose writing as our focal area of concern. Thus, assuming competence in BNE, our purpose was to discover (1) whether a comparable competence in SE would be reflected in the students' writing, given certain motivational constraints and (2) whether the use of, or failure to use, SE in writing would be affected by the psycho-cultural constraints which we hypothesized.

The success of Janet Emig's case study of the composing process (1971) convinced us of the feasibility of the case study approach for exploratory research in writing. We were thereby encouraged to adopt a similar approach for our exploratory investigation into written linguistic performance and attitudes influencing that performance. We felt, also, that a case study approach was more conducive, than an experimental design would be, to the discovery

and descriptive analysis of the kinds of attitudes and behaviors with which we were concerned. We, therefore, chose through random sampling from the list of freshmen English students at a predominantly black college in the Southeast, twelve students whose school records revealed that they were products of low socio-economic backgrounds. Of the twelve, six were used for intensive case study analysis; the other six served as alternates and provided supplementary attitudinal data for the study. As part of our attitudinal study, we also engaged the eight teachers who taught the twelve students participating in the study.

Taped interviews were made for all students and teachers participating in the study. Questionnaires constructed by us and designed to elicit attitudinal data about writing and language supplementary to that of the interviews were distributed to all students and teachers. The interview transcripts and questionnaire responses were analyzed by us for attitudinal information relative to our psycho-cultural hypothesis. Three to five writing samples of the six case study participants were collected over a semester's period. Two of the writing samples were based on topics which we requested the teachers to use in their classes, and which were designed by us as situational and motivational constraints for SE; the others were based on regular teacher-assigned topics, and in a few cases, self-sponsored[3] writing.

[3]A term used by Emig in the Composing Processes to mean writing initiated by the students' own interests and generally engaged in outside of school. The term is contrasted with school-sponsored writing.

These samples were analyzed by us for data pertinent to our bidialectal hypothesis. Other data were drawn from the taped transcripts of structured role-playing activities designed by us to provide contextual constraints for the use of the two dialects and from autobiographical statements written by the student participants.

The study revealed, in support of our hypothesis, that in their classroom writing, in both the grammatical and lexical domain, all students in the sample exhibited a command of SE and a corresponding absence of either BNE or general nonstandardness sufficient to establish their functional ability in the writing of SE. There was little observable difference in the degree of standardness or nonstandardness reflected in the writing samples of the students on topics assigned by their regular teachers and those written on topics designed by us with the express intention of providing situational constraints for use of SE. We thus concluded, given the students' attitude largely conditioned by teacher emphasis, of the appropriateness or preferability of SE for classroom writing (particularly in the English class), that the classroom context itself provided sufficient motivation to elicit SE performance in writing.

The findings also indicated that the hypothesized psychocultural barriers to the students' SE written performance did not appear to operate significantly in the classroom writing of the six case study students involved. The barriers or constraints,

according to our hypothesis, include the students' identity perceptions, their allegiance to ethnic and peer group cultural values, and their reactions to teacher perceptions and evaluations of them and their language, any or all of which might negatively affect their motivation to use SE. While the students showed little hostility toward, or rejection of, SE as the language appropriate for writing in the college classroom, their motivation for using the standard variety was primarily instrumental, i.e., they wanted to please the teacher, receive a passing grade, and move onward in their academic careers. Thus while they admitted to little personal engagement with their writing assignments, they were keenly aware of the possible academic penalties that could accrue from their failure to employ SE in their writing.

In addition to their perception of SE as the language for classroom writing, the students also appear to accept SE as the language of educated people, of social and business interaction, and of formal discourse. Their perception and acceptance reflect the traditional views of their teachers and, by extension, the academic, social, and business communities. Of the six students comprising the case studies, the motivation to use SE by four of them appeared to be in Wallace Lambert's (1961) views, purely instrumental, i.e., they regarded its use as a practical necessity for realizing some of their academic, social and occupational aims. For the other two students, in addition to a strong instrumental motivation, there were indications, for example, in one student's desire for middle class status and in another's for association

(not just communication) with perceived prestige groups, of at least a perceptible degree of integrative motivation. It appeared, then, that the students' apparent acceptance of the instrumental benefits to be gained through their conformity to prevailing socially and academically accepted norms of linguistic behavior seemed to act as a significant constraint for SE performance in their classroom writing.

While these constraints did not serve as barriers to the students' production of SE in their writing, we found that when they did operate they served more to intensify the students' resistance to efforts to eradicate BNE than as psycho-cultural barriers to their use of SE. The desire of the students to maintain a personal and cultural identification with BNE appeared to be the strongest constraint for the retention of BNE as a language valuable and functional for their personal and group communicative, expressive, and identity needs. Thus, the identity factor, one of the hypothesized psycho-cultural constraints, while not acting as a deterrent to SE performance in classroom writing, emerged as a strong factor not only in the students' desire to retain BNE for meaningful personal and group expression and cultural identification, but also in their unwillingness to relinquish it or replace it with SE. This finding is in keeping with Erikson's (1968) postulation of a necessary psycho-social identity which provides individuals and groups with an anchoring that solidifies and stabilizes their developmental and historical existence.

The students proved thus to be bidialectal both in linguistic competence and performance (supporting the investigators' postulation of the students' functional bidialectalism) and in attitude, i.e., they perceived of both SE and BNE as viable language varieties, each having appropriateness and functionality in particular situational contexts. The findings seemed to suggest that it is because of the students' bidialectal attitude, ability, and performance that they are not resistant to SE for classroom writing.

The fact that the hypothesized psycho-cultural constraints did not appear to serve as significant barriers to written production of SE among the students in our sample does not necessarily affect the validity of that hypothesis for other populations. Since it is difficult to generalize from the six students in our sample, more research with intensive case studies, covering a longer period of time, of a wider sampling of students from more diverse geographical locations might produce different results. Such studies could conceivably provide a more adequate and more valid representation of language attitudes and language behavior of black college youths, especially those attitudes and behaviors that affect SE production in writing, and possibly offer sufficient evidence to support our hypothesis. Our study, using a small sample, explores a heretofore virtually untouched area with the expectation not only of testing and possibly validating an untested hypothesis, but also of generating research possibilities for further investigation.

Much of the meager research so far into the attitudinal and motivational constraints affecting SE production has focused on BNE speakers at the kindergarten and elementary levels of our inner-city schools primarily of the North and Midwest, with emphasis on oral expression. Studies about black college students are extremely scarce and limited to a few brief and scattered references in the literature. What studies there are emphasize the structural differences between SE and BNE, while the area of language attitudes and the linguistic behavior resulting from these attitudes remains virtually unexamined and fraught with exciting possibilities for research that may yield much needed insights into the pressing linguistic problems confronting BNE speakers in the SE college environment.

One of the most significant pedagogical implications of this study is that generalizing from the students involved, black students are linguistically more sophisticated in SE usage than they are given credit for by most linguists and educators. The high level of consistent control of SE grammatical features and the low frequency of BNE features in their writing attest to this sophistication. If minimum occurrences of BNE features in black students' writing are in fact more prevalent than is generally recognized, then their English teachers should concentrate less on drilling students on grammatical features and focus more on other aspects of writing, e.g., development of coherent, logical, and thoughtful content, development and refinement of personal writing style, and experimentation with various levels or registers of language. In addition,

educators may need to reevaluate the need for and usefulness of remedial English courses as they are now structured in many schools that serve black students.

A close look at the students' linguistic behavior suggests that this linguistic sophistication extends to bidialectal competence, as we hypothesized, which was confirmed in both written and oral performance. This bidialectal competency permits a certain amount of linguistic security wherein the student is able to manipulate at will whatever language that is appropriate or necessary for the situation. If students demonstrate a high level of bidialectal competency, as the students in our study suggest, then teachers need to focus on encouraging students to exercise their various language options for defining and clarifying their experiences within the various contexts of those experiences. This investigation, then, adds to the growing evidence (Fader, 1971; Kochman, 1972; Labov et al., 1968; R. Troike, 1972) that BNE speakers are in fact more functionally bidialectal than is generally believed; however, more research is needed to determine degree and kind.

The study raises the question as to how language attitudes can contribute to more positive views about writing. The students apparently have a strong personal and group identification with BNE and do not wish to eliminate it from their linguistic repertoire. It is equally true that the students in this study demonstrate a functional control of SE in their writing. Attempts to eradicate BNE in favor of SE would mean eradicating a language that is

meaningful and functional for its users, an act that would contribute very little to the already low level of writing interests. A more favorable predisposition toward language could possibly soften students' negative attitudes toward writing. Greater provision for more personally meaningful writing assignments and greater flexibility of linguistic expression, including the language variety with which students feel most comfortable, could facilitate interest in writing which in time might be productive of not only greater linguistic facility, but also of the intrinsic writing motivation necessary for maximum realization of this facility.

If, as the findings indicate, the students are linguistically facile, versatile, and flexible in using language varieties, then educators and curriculum planners, aided by current and future research, need to examine and revamp the instructional program in freshman English for black students to accommodate the reordering of priorities in instructional emphases, teaching strategies and materials, and teacher attitudes toward dialects and dialect speakers. The placement of these priorities, recognizing black students' demonstrated bidialectal ability and performance capability in SE, may more quickly facilita and hasten student growth in both written and oral expression.

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